

Muncie launches multi-million-dollar quiet zone effort

Mayor Dennis Tyler is tying a rebuild of South Madison to the quiet zone project, which benefits new downtown hotel

Jun. 26, 2014 1:21 AM |

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Cars wait for a train to cross Willard Street. The crossing is one of a few that could see upgraded safety features. / The Star Press file photo

Written by

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MUNCIE — Mayor Dennis Tyler is launching a multi-million-dollar project to implement a quiet zone in the core of the [city](#) and is tying it into a major rebuild of South Madison Street.

The quiet zone project — which would involve closing or upgrading downtown-area railroad crossings to eliminate the need for trains to sound their whistles — is a goal that's proved elusive in the past. Previous mayors have attempted quiet zone agreements but failed.

Tyler told The Star Press on Wednesday — shortly after the city Board of Works and Public Safety approved a preliminary quiet zone engineering agreement with rail companies CSX Transportation and Norfolk Southern — that the quiet zone project has been estimated in [costs](#) up to \$5 million.

“This the boldest project to improve our [quality](#) of place in the city of Muncie in many years,” Tyler said. “And it’s the right thing to do for Muncie.”

Although quiet zone efforts have not come to fruition for past mayors including Dan Canan and Sharon McShurley, Tyler has a couple of things they did not, including the new agreement with CSX and Norfolk Southern approved Wednesday.

Tyler also has some [money](#) committed to the \$5 million quiet zone project. The mayor confirmed Wednesday he’s received a commitment of \$1.4 million from The Arc of Indiana, the advocacy group that’s building a \$40 million Courtyard by Marriott hotel on the south edge of downtown, just north of the railroad tracks.

The Arc also pledged \$170,000 toward the city’s \$237,000 cost for the engineering study with CSX and Norfolk Southern, Tyler said.

As for the balance of the \$5 million-plus project, Tyler said, “We’ll have to find the [funding](#).”

The quiet zone would benefit the Arc’s hotel, which is expected to see a groundbreaking as early as August and to open in fall 2015. Previous mayors tried to get a quiet zone implemented to help the Roberts [Hotel](#) before it closed in 2006. The Roberts is now the Lofts at Roberts, a senior apartment development.

The Arc’s hotel will be six stories tall and will include not only 150 rooms and a Thr3e Wise Men [restaurant](#) but also a training center for people with disabilities who want to be employed in the hospitality industry. The city is also about to announce details of a parking garage it will build adjacent to the hotel and Horizon Convention Center.

Initial indications that Tyler was working toward a new quiet zone plan were reported in The Star Press in March, when city engineering [consultants](#) were meeting with the railroads and representatives of the Federal Railroad Administration and walking the length of CSX and Norfolk Southern tracks to study crossings.

Wednesday’s agreement was “the first phase that had to be put in place to move forward,” Tyler said. “We wanted the railroads and the Federal Railroad Administration to know we’re serious about eliminating 4,000 train whistles a day. ... This is the first time money has been invested with the railroads for a preliminary engineering study.”

Tyler said the FRA provided that estimate of the number of train whistles in the area that would become the quiet zone.

A quiet zone would reduce the need for railroad locomotives to sound train whistles in a multi-block area downtown. The goal is to reduce the noise of whistles to an acceptable 70-80 decibels audible in a circle that reaches to Ninth Street on the south, Elliott Street to the west, White River and Muncie City Hall on the north and Pershing Drive to the east.

Although the plan has not been finalized, the quiet zone might mean closing streets at crossings including but not limited to Pershing, Vine, Jefferson, Elm, Council and either Ninth or 10th streets.

Crossings to see upgraded safety features would include Walnut, Monroe, Liberty, Willard and others. Those crossings would see state-of-the-art equipment that would make it almost impossible for cars to enter the tracks with warning arms down. The improvements might include medians to prevent motorists from going around the crossing arms.

Not part of the agreement with the railroads but a project that some of the Arc money will be used for are improvements to South Madison Street that include a rebuilt street and sidewalks on both sides as far north as downtown, as well as landscaping and poles for banners.

“It’s a visual concept along that corridor that we think will ensure the success of what we’re trying to do,” Tyler said.

The improvements proposed by Tyler will start just north of the currently-under-construction southside gateway project at the city’s southern limits at Madison and Walnut streets.

Tyler said he believes improvements to South Madison Street will spark new commercial development.

“Both of these projects are so important to our quality of place,” Tyler said. “They’re critical for our growth and development as a city.”